Integrating DI and UbD

Chapter 1: UbD and DI, An Essential Partnership

As Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe allude to, Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction are two separate sides of the same coin. They hold similar responsibilities and actions, both serve the same purpose, but cannot exist without the other. I found it fairly difficult to decide on a specific, concrete answer for either of the terms, as each is so invested in the other.

The two serve the purpose of “crafting powerful curriculum in a standards-dominated era and ensuring academic success for the full spectrum of learners” (p.2). There obvious district, state, and country wide obligations to be met by the students and the teacher, but spewing the information out and having the students copy it down isn’t the most effective – and truly does not provide the best education framework – for the students. There needs to be a combination of proper curriculum and flexible instruction to relay the information to the students in an effective manor. I understood this – what surprised was the extent at which the axioms and corollaries went. Not only do we, as teachers, need to recognize that students need variance in time and support, but we have to constantly provide opportunities for the expression of said flexibility. The students must also be constantly reminded where they should be headed with their work, to make sure that they do not fall off task. However, they must not be stifled by instruction. The entire processing of teaching, and specifically implementing UbD and DI is one of a give and take nature – there will never be one defined solution for any situation, and it will never be the same. The prospect of teaching is one that forever changes and will never be the same, so we must be open to flexibility in learning but regimented in what we provide as instruction.

Chapter 2: What Really Matters In Teaching?

As we learned in the first chapter, teaching is not just about the educator relaying information as a supreme ruler over the class. In reality, there should be a joing effort between the students and teacher, and the focus should be based on the work itself and the variations in the students receiving said information. Through my experience as a tutor in a middle school, I quickly realized that there are, much of the time, variables that lies outside the realm of the classroom but affect students just as greatly. It’s a difficult battle, but as Tomlinson and McTighe write, “the optimism of teaching [is] that if we keep trying, we will find a way to address the problems that, in the meantime, obstruct learner success” (p. 15). I agree with this sentiment: The success of the teacher does not come from how well her students grade on the SAT, or how many facts he can explain in an hour, but how well they respond to a problem and how well they adapt for when it happens again. The act of educating is one where teachers must react to their students, and allow for extreme variability to ensure student success, which, in turn, creates teacher success. “Education is about learning,” Tomlinson and McTighe explain, “Learning happens within students, not to them” (p. 22). There must be a constant conversation between the content, the instruction, the students, and the teacher.

Chapter 3: What Really Matters in Learning?

I find the aspect of content to be an extremely confusing but astronomically important one. If I don’t have a proper, well-planned, and well-modeled curriculum for me and my students to follow, I will essentially fail as a teacher. To succeed, I must provide my student with appropriate information that they cannot only use in their standardized tests, but in the real world. However, as the authors state, it’s increasingly hard to follow the standards states set out. Thankfully, the subject of English does not change too much, and the content lends itself to the idea of a “conceptual lens”, where students understand a specific subject but can also apply it to larger concepts, satisfying various guidelines. “We believe,” Tomlinson and McTighe write, “that a teacher’s job is to teach for learning of important content, to check regularly for understanding on the parts of all students, and to make adjustments based on results” (p. 28). That’s where the concept of backwards learning comes in, and I completely support the idea. I may have a great idea or desire to teach a certain piece of literature or poetry, but I must discover what I want to achieve with the content before I dive in to instruction. The state, while possibly providing too many standards, should provide standards that are made up of essential questions, lending to my planning. Backwards design lends itself to an incredibly full and detailed design plan which is also open to differentiation, and it creates a sort of exciting lead up to actually teaching the content.

Chapter 4: What Really Matters in Planning for Student Success?

Tomlinson and McTighe spell out in this chapter what I’ve been supposing as I read through the earlier chapters: teaching is a hugely varied and intricate job that works best when the teacher themselves addresses such intricacies. Teachers should “establish clarity… accept responsibility.. develop communities… build awareness… help students… develops flexibly… reflect on progress…” (p. 40), only a few tasks required to truly be effective. To be a successful teacher, one must first be a successful human being that is open to change and is watchful cautious of the world and people around them. I found the aspect of developing routines that actually contribute to success to be important. It may seem to work when teachers line out specific rules to keep students in check, but allowing them the opportunity to review their own actions and have a say in the management is very positive. Not only do they feel more involved, but they also gain responsibility over their actions. The authors write that “there’s no such thing as the perfect lesson, the perfect day in school, or the perfect teacher,” (p. 56) but it’s incredibly important to strive towards those goals. Motivation and persistence may not end up creating a classroom utopia, but it keeps teachers on their toes and students in the loop.